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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KISL IR AJ
SUBJECT: FARAH PANDITH'S MEETINGS WITH AZERBAIJANI ISLAMIC FIGURES

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a late April trip, EUR Senior Advisor Farah Pandith met with several Azerbaijani Islamic communities in diverse regions of Azerbaijan. Mirpasha Bayramov -- the leader of the Binagadi religious community of Baku -- provided Pandith with background on his community, which provides Islamic theology courses to the public. The community teaches over 100 students per year, and its activities are financed through wealthy, private individuals, according to Bayramov. Bayramov said his group's efforts are central to countering the outreach efforts Wahabbis' "propaganda machine." Bayramov observed that the Turkish Nurcular movement is strongest in some Azerbaijani educational institutions and their ideas can sometimes serve as a "bridge" to more radical Islamic positions. Local officials in Lenkaran and Astara denied that Iranian religious influence in southern Azerbaijan is limited -- an observation that was reinforced during Pandith's meetings with local university and madrassa students. In meetings in Nardaran, local religious leaders emphasized Azerbaijan's history of religious tolerance, while complaining about the GOAJ's unwillingness to address local complaints about the lack of basic services such as gas and water. In all of these areas, local shrines -- burial sites of venerated holy people -- draw large numbers of visitors, reportedly from throughout the region. End Summary

Religious Community Filling the Educational Void

¶2. (SBU) Mirpasha Bayramov -- the leader of the Binagadi community -- provided Pandith with background on his religious community. (Note: Bayramov and another participant at the meeting, Mirhamid Mammadov -- a Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) registered imam at two Baku mosques, visited the U.S. in March as part of the International Visitors Program. Both participants are grateful for their visit to the U.S. and said they were surprised by the level of religious freedom in the U.S.) The Binagadi religious community seeks to educate Azerbaijanis about Islam, according to Bayramov, and to explain the pitfalls of Wahabbism. The community teaches approximately 100 students per year; the center has taught over 400 students. The community offers a variety of courses and Koranic studies classes that are open to different branches of Islam. The courses are financed completely through private donations; the community receives no money

from the government. In the spirit of fostering Azerbaijan's tradition of tolerance, the community teaches about other religions. The majority of members are Shia. The community has had peaceful discussions with Wahabbis, some of whom have even moderated their positions because of contact with the Binagadi community, according to Bayramov.

¶3. (SBU) Bayramov said his recent trip to the U.S. was a valuable experience. He said he was surprised by the level of religious freedom he encountered in the U.S. He observed that American Muslims enjoy a higher level of religious freedom than Muslims in most Islamic countries. Bayramov said that he has been sharing his observations with many Azerbaijanis since returning.

¶4. (C) Pandith asked Bayramov whether Azerbaijani youth value religious tolerance. Bayramov said there is no history of religious conflict in Azerbaijan, and that various religious confessions have a strong track record of cooperation and respect. In the past several years, however, foreign Islamic influences have disturbed this tradition of tolerance. Bayramov focused on Wahabbism as a particular challenge to Azerbaijan's history of peaceful inter-confessional relations. Bayramov cited three factors that have led to the growth of Wahabbism: limited opportunities to learn about Islam, high levels of poverty, and the well-organized, well-trained nature of Wahabbi outreach efforts. Some Azerbaijani youth fall under the influence of Wahabbism when they go abroad for their education. Wahabbi literature in Azerbaijan also exercises an influence on some Azerbaijani youth. Bayramov noted that Azerbaijan's religious establishment has a much lower capacity relative to the Wahabbi "propaganda machine." Bayramov also observed that Wahabbi organizations also actively use the internet to disseminate information.

¶5. (C) Bayramov estimated there are approximately 1,000 Wahabbis in Azerbaijan. The Ministry of National Security

has only arrested approximately 100 Wahabbi radicals, according to Bayramov. Bayramov said Wahabbis in Azerbaijan refer to themselves as Salafists in order to avoid the negative connotation of "Wahabbi." Bayramov said attendance at Baku's Abu Bakr mosque is a good indicator of the scope of Wahabbism in Azerbaijan, while commenting that the number of Shias converting to Wahabbism is low. (Attendance at Abu Bakr mosque,s Friday prayers reportedly numbers up to 5,000 to 7,000.)

¶6. (C) Commenting on the Turkish Nurcu movement, Bayramov said the group's influence is strongest in some Azerbaijani educational institutions. Bayramov said the Nurcu movement can lead to the "Sunnification" of students who study in Turkey. Bayramov said his community is not against the Nurcus, but their ideas sometimes serve as a "bridge" to Wahabbism. Bayramov also commented that Nurculars represent a non-indigenous form of Islam with Azerbaijan.

¶7. (C) Bayramov acknowledged that the government has done a good job of containing Iranian Islamic influence in Azerbaijan. Bayramov said the GOAJ is trying to avoid religious conflict within Azerbaijan, and there has not been any such problems "yet."

Visits to Lenkaran, Astara, and Nardaran

¶8. (C) On an April 28 visit to Lenkaran (Azerbaijan,s largest city near the border with Iran), Pandith met with the local governor, the CMB-appointed imam, the rector of Lenkaran State University, university students, madrassa students, and a local human rights activist. The governor and the imam repeated the familiar refrain of Azerbaijan,s record of religious tolerance. Both denied that Iranian religious propaganda had made serious inroads with the local

population and claimed that Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazade is accepted by "95 percent" of the population as their primary source of religious guidance. Pandith asked the governor about whether youth have easy access to the internet. "This isn,t Mozambique," the governor replied, assuring her that internet cafes are prevalent and that all schools have internet access. (Note: Three American Peace Corps volunteers in Lenkaran later told Pandith that internet access is still quite limited).

¶9. (C) Despite the intimidating presence of several of their professors, the university students engaged Pandith in a free-wheeling exchange of views on a range of subjects. Asked about their concerns, interests, and the influence of religion, students said they were interested in music, fashion, and finding jobs. The girls, in particular, described their conservative local culture and protective parents as more of an inhibiting influence than Islam itself. The madrassa students, like their older counterparts, shared the same general interests and concerns of all youth. (Note: The group of 12 madrassa students are recipients of Embassy microscholarships and are taking English classes three days a week.) Both the university and madrassa students said they had occasional access to the internet, but were much more likely to use their mobile phones than computers.

¶10. (C) The local human rights activist confirmed that radical religious elements have not made serious inroads in Lenkaran, but argued that they have had more success in some of the culturally-conservative surrounding villages. She noted, for example, that compulsory marriage of underage girls is very common.

¶11. (C) Pandith also visited several Islamic shrines and mosques in Lenkaran and Astara. (Note: Astara lies on the border with Iran). Local officials from Astara met and escorted Pandith on her tour of the region and local imams were delighted to give tours at each of the holy sites. The shrines are typically the resting place of local "saints" who lived and died centuries before. Despite their incompatibility with orthodox Islam, the shrines are heavily visited and kept in excellent condition by the local residents. They are widely considered holy sites (perhaps more so than mosques) and locals now often choose to bury loved ones in their vicinity. (Note: Many Azerbaijanis continue to follow the un-Islamic, Soviet practice of etching photos of the deceased on the tombstones.) The local officials and imams claimed that the shrines are also frequently visited by foreigners from Iran, Central Asia, and Turkey. The beautiful old mosque in Astara does have

separate sections for men and women, but the imam was more than happy to give Pandith a full tour of the facility.

¶12. (C) Pandith also visited the village of Nardaran, the purported "hotbed" of Islamic radicalism in Azerbaijan located an hour from Baku on the Absheron peninsula. In a meeting with one of the religious leaders (and editor of a weekly newspaper, "Islamic Truths") and a local opposition politician, Pandith asked about the community,s religious traditions and relations with the GOAJ. They explained that Nardaran, too, has a long history of religious tolerance. A venerated Shi,a "saint" is buried in Nardaran,s mosque and the community continues to
be home to several highly-respected religiously-devout families have lived in Nardaran for centuries. The residents say that their complaints in recent years that their village lacks basic amenities (gas, water) have gone unanswered by GOAJ officials. Subsequent protests by the community were violently repressed, several community leaders were imprisoned (although later released), and resentment continues. Interestingly, neither of Pandith,s interlocutors used the opportunity to criticize US policy towards Islam or the Middle East, although they did express some disappointment that the USG had not done more to support

the opposition in the flawed 2003 and 2005 elections.

¶13. (C) Pandith also visited the Rehime Khanim Mosque, which is revered as the burial site of one of the seventh imam's sisters (Rehime). The enormous complex resembles a large Middle Eastern mosque and was purportedly built entirely with private contributions from local residents. (Note: This is highly unlikely and we suspect that much of the money came from Iran.) Several shrines, including the grave of Rehime, are located in the basement of the complex and are probably among the most frequently visited holy sites in the entire region.

Comment

¶14. (C) Bayramov's religious community's focus on religious education fills an important gap in educating Azerbaijani Muslims about their faith -- a void that more extremist elements can also readily fill. The community also appears to have some degree of independence from the government, which likely enhances its credibility for average Azerbaijanis. We are concerned that the general lack of theological training opportunities increases the appeal of Salafist Islamic groups who possess more sophisticated, better-funded outreach tools in some Azerbaijani communities. Pandith's engagement with local students in Lenkaran and Astara suggests that radical Islam has not made serious inroads in this part of the country, although there likely are exceptions to this trend. Pandith's visit to Nardaran also suggests that many in the village are religiously devout, but not necessarily a "hotbed" of Islamic radicalism. We will continue to engage with these communities.

¶15. (U) Pandith did not have the opportunity to review this message.
DERSE